

Ethnicity and Transnational Relations of Cuban Immigrants in Germany. An Insight into a Case Reconstruction

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Abstract: In my presentation of a case reconstruction of a Cuban migrant living in Berlin, I provide detailed insight into the diachronical/biographical dynamics of ethnic belonging, the dealing with categorizations and the forms of transnational relations. The article also details the situation of Cuban immigrants in Germany.

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1. Introduction

As part of the research program entitled "Biography and Ethnicity" carried out in the social sciences department at the Georg-August-University Göttingen, we conducted narrative biographical interviews with different groups of immigrants who have settled in Germany. In the scope of this project, I focused my research on Cuban immigrants. After first collecting data in Göttingen and neighboring cities, we expanded our research to cover larger cities such as Berlin, where the Cuban community is larger due to better employment possibilities and thanks to the former Soviet Union's connections with Cuba. As the title of our research "Biography and Ethnicity" indicates, in the beginning of our data analysis we tended to focus on the parts of the interview, in which ethnic identity was explicitly expressed. Furthermore, by choosing a specific group in our research design, we were aware that we ascribed ethnic belonging and subsumed people from the same country of origin into one category. In doing so, we tended to take groups for granted and to presuppose the belonging to the latter, as demonstrated by Roger BRUBAKER:

"The tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents for social life (...) to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests

and agency can be attributed (...) to reify such groups (...) as if they were internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups" (BRUBAKER, 2004, p.8). [1]

By asking the initial question intended to solicit the subject's entire biography, we tried to avoid "framing the interviewee" and ascribing preliminary ethnic belongings. Nevertheless, it was a challenge to overcome our notions and to enter into the perspective of the interviewee while neither taking groups for granted nor ignoring the external socially ascribed classifications of the interviewee—in this case ascribing them as "Cubans" in Germany. As the interviews revealed, skin color plays an important role in this process. Particularly in marginalized groups, overlooking the classification of the interviewee experienced and suffered in both their country of origin and in the host society would signify ignorance towards the discrimination suffered by the interviewee. [2]

In the following I wish to present the case reconstruction of the biography of Roberto Parra¹—a Cuban immigrant living in Berlin—to illustrate:

1. Under which circumstances the sense of ethnic belonging becomes secondary in Roberto's biography—such as how his desperate and unfulfilled desire to belong to someone replaces the sense of belonging to an ethnic group. Rejected by his family, Roberto had difficulties in developing a sense of belonging—a belonging to any kind of group—since his birth and while growing up in Cuba.
2. How the interviewee deals with external ethnic ascriptions of the host society, such as how Roberto uses the external ethnic categorizations and ascriptions (of the belonging Cubans as a group)—with which he was confronted in the host society—to legitimize personal faults and weaknesses. By presenting himself as determined by his ethnic roots², personality and behavior linked with hereditary characteristics, and limited agency, he refuses to take responsibility for his actions.
3. How, in the case of Roberto, migration (i.e. the separation across national borders) and the improvement of his economic situation and social status made it possible for Roberto to re-establish contact with his family. Here geographical separation implicates a reunion. For Roberto, a relationship with his family seems only to be possible in the form of a transnational relationship. In addition, the positive connection to his home country increases in the context of migration. [3]

Subsequently Roberto Parra's biography will be illustrated within the context of the other biographies of the Cuban migrants we interviewed. [4]

1 All name and dates have been changed by the author.

2 This is the term Roberto used.

2. Summary: Roberto Parra's Case Reconstruction

Before presenting the case reconstruction, I would like to briefly describe the framing of the interview. Our first contact with the interviewees was established via friends and acquaintances or social networks within the Latino community. Contact with Roberto was established in the same manner. As Roberto is the ex-partner of one of the interviewer's friends³ it is possible that the framing in which the interview took place influenced his self-presentation. Roberto preferred to be interviewed in Spanish, as he felt "more secure" in his mother tongue. [5]

Roberto Parra was born in Holguín⁴, a province in eastern Cuba, in 1972, as the second child. In 1964 Cuba was excluded from the OAS (Organization of American States). All Latin American countries, with exception of Mexico, cut off diplomatic relations with Cuba. As a consequence, Cuba intensified its relationship with the Soviet Union and brought its economic system in line with the USSR to guarantee sustainability (ZEUSKE, 2000, p.198). After the "golden years" of the revolution, in the 1970s the standard of living in Cuba was extremely austere and discontent was rife (PEREZ, 1999). Castro initiated a series of economic reforms in the mid-1970s (ZEUSKE, 2000, p.196). By 1968 the entire economy (including restaurants, bars and micro business) was nationalized. [6]

Both of Roberto's parents grew up with their grandparents, as they had been abandoned by their parents during childhood. Both of them suffered severe break-ups in social relationships as well as changes of the persons, upon whom they could most closely rely. In an act of rebellion, Roberto's mother and father married at the age of fifteen and twenty, respectively, against the wishes of Roberto's grandparents. As a result of economic dependence, they lived in the house of Roberto's grandparents on his father's side. At first the latter did not accept Roberto's mother. His sister was born in 1971 followed by Roberto a year later. He was born into a difficult situation. His mother was already marked by severe break ups of her relationships. Her feelings of rejection seem to be deeply rooted and reinforced by the rejection of her (grand-) parents-in-law. She did not want Roberto and had an abortion but Roberto was nevertheless born as it turned out that the abortion had only removed Roberto's twin. He was told about the abortion during his childhood. He recalls the situation as follows:

"They say I, well when my mother as young as she was when she became pregnant with my sister, they didn't want more children, and, and and that I was born because of a broken condom, (...) when carrying out the abortion, they removed a foetus, but

3 Interviewers: Lore LEHMANN and Katharina WESENICK.

4 Holguín is a densely populated province in the southeast of Cuba with a predominantly white population of Spanish origin. Roberto himself is white.

they didn't notice that, that, that, that= there was another one (2) and that's how I was born."⁵ [7]

What are the implications for a child, if he/she discovers that his parents intended to abort him/her? Roberto felt deeply rejected when he heard that his parents did not want him to be born. This feeling was also experienced later in his life and seems to accompany him to this day. Because of the continuous experiences of rejection and a lack of love, it is possible that Roberto is overemphasizing the psychological load of the intended abortion from the perspective of the present. [8]

Soon after his birth, Roberto's father had to serve in the military for two years. The Cuban government dispatched troops to fight Soviet-supported wars in Africa (the Angolan war of 1975-1978), and it is highly possible that Roberto's father was sent to Africa to fight. Roberto's mother was not prepared to properly care for Roberto during his early years, so he probably suffered from a lack of care and closeness during that time. Yet when Roberto speaks about his "difficult childhood," he does not blame his mother for her absence. Instead he justifies her behavior by presenting her as a victim of the circumstances.

"and: (6) mmmyes (5) 'I don't know' (5) she tells me that I cried a lot when I was a baby, and for sure it was because of stress she suffered, so young, my father in the military service without a good relationship with my-his/her grandparents, without= money=having=to =go= to= the countryside=for=buying=things=and=selling=them= in=the=city and for sure that I didn't have much=attention, because of her inexperience (...)"⁷

My mother's life was difficult, well be-before she was fifteen years old, my mother also suffered a lot, because her parents split up, she lived with with the father, the father had another wife and: who didn't treat her well and mmh in the end my gra-my mother went to live with her grandmother and there she had to work a lot."⁸ [9]

His mother's situation must have been extremely difficult, as she had no support from her grandparents-in-law. The fact that she had to go to the country-side to sell things exemplifies her low social and economic status at that time. [10]

5 Original quotation in Spanish: "dicen que yo, bueno a mí mamá salir, tan joven embarazada de mi hermana, que no deseaban tener más niños, y, y y que yo nací de un, condón 'que se rompió' (...) Al hacer el aborto, sacaron un feto, pero no se dieron cuenta que, que, que=quedaba otro no (2) y así nací yo."

6 The interview extracts are transcribed according to ROSENTHAL (2005, p.95).

7 Original quotation in Spanish: "y: (6) mmhja (5) 'no sé' (5) lo que me dice que yo lloraba mucho cuando bebé, y segu-seguro era por esa situación de=esters que tenía ella misma, tan joven, con mi padre en el servicio military sin una Buena relación con mi- con sus abuelos, sin dinero teniendo=que=ir=al=campo=a=comprar=cosá=pararevendéle=en=la=ciudad y seguro que no, que yo no tuve 'la=mejor=atención por su inexperience, pero bueno, quizá eso me ayudó, y, y fortificó mi, mi voz, 'y ahora soy cantante'."

8 Original quotation in Spanish: "fue difícil la vida de mí mama, anteriormente- bueno an- ante de los quince año, mi mama también, sufrió mucho, porque sus padres se se separaron/ella vivió con con con el papa, el papa, el papa tenía otra mujer y: que no era tan buena con ella y mmh al final mi abue-mi mama se fue a vivir con su abuela y allá tuvo que trabajar mucho."

At the age of nine, Roberto's parents sent him to a boarding school, which specialized in music, as Roberto already had a gift for playing guitar. Although his school was located in the same city, Roberto had to spend the nights at the school during the week—which is typical for the Cuban education system—but this experience nevertheless again provoked Roberto's feelings of being abandoned by his parents. In revolutionary Cuba, boarding schools were established in an attempt to distance children from their parents, grandparents and other retrograde influences and to create "the new man" espoused by Socialist ideals (SMITH & PADULA, 1996, p.146). Roberto was only allowed to come home on weekends and see his mother during visiting times. It is highly probable that Roberto in those times started to compensate for the emotional deficits he suffered with the help of music. At the age of thirteen, Roberto continued his career as a musician by moving from Holguín to Santiago de Cuba and attended high school, specializing in music. Leaving all his classmates and his family behind, Roberto this time actively separated himself from his entire social network. It was the first separation in which he himself decided to leave instead of being left by others. [11]

From that point onwards, he continually ended his relationships with others for fear of being left and facing further rejection. These break-ups were often related to his moves to another city. After graduating from high school in Santiago, he found a job as a composer in a theater. It was during his time in Santiago that he suffered most from the "periodo especial." The so-called "Special Period in Time of Peace" was a government imposed austerity program that followed the loss of important Soviet subsidies after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989. The state was incapable of providing the most basic necessities and social services. Transport broke down and food was rationed. Roberto recalls having to beg for the leftovers of a pizza on the terrace of a Santiago restaurant. Two years later, he decided to move to the wealthier city Havana in order to continue his education at the University and repeatedly left his social networks behind. [12]

After two more years in Havana, Roberto started to play with a popular Cuban band and toured around South America for about a year, and was fascinated by the wealth and abundance he found there. After he was expelled from the University of Havana as a result of the tour, he had difficulties adapting to the "simple Cuban life" again and soon had a bad experience with the Cuban police (he was arrested for one night for failure to produce identification documents). It was then that Roberto's desire to migrate increased significantly.⁹ His episodes about that time of Cuba are exclusively negative and full of contempt. Cubans, says Roberto for example, were "like breastfed babies, who were not able to stand on their own two feet." In 1996 at the age of twenty two, Roberto met a German tourist in Havana. They started a "party friendship"—as Roberto calls it—and the German acquaintance sent him an official invitation that allowed him to come to Germany for three months on a tourist visa. The migration seems here as just another of a series of separations. Roberto's manner of speaking about his experiences in Berlin is ambiguous: He likes Berlin, but he is also confronted

9 One million Cubans emigrated between 1959 and 1990 (CORNEBISE, 2003, p.7).

with obstacles to which he must "adapt" and other difficult aspects of life in Germany. The majority (nearly one eighth)¹⁰ of Cuban immigrants in Germany live in Berlin. The district Kreuzberg—where Roberto lives—is a truly multicultural part of the city, and Roberto enjoys this multicultural flair. He also seems to enjoy the individual and anonymous atmosphere in this large German city, where he feels "free":

"I started to earn well playing music with, with all kind of musicians African musicians, Brazilian, Latin Americans and, and I went to a German school to start to learn the language then I decided to stay in Berlin and not to go to Spain I liked Berlin, I liked Berlin because of the (4) I don't know because of, perhaps because of the tolerance and the liberty."¹¹ [13]

Roberto speaks about his fellow immigrant's difficulties in adapting:

"The life as a Cuban in Berlin is difficult, it is difficult especially when, when you reject all that you don't like, what what you don't like in Germany, there are many different things (2) ne, which one, has to learn and accept in Germany if not, you can't integrate into society (2) I know many Cubans who hate (3) in spite of living here in Germany for many years (2) hate the Germans (2) they don't speak German (2) live on welfare and drink rum and play Dominos every day, and don't have a future."¹² [14]

Again Roberto distances himself from other Cubans. He posits his "success story" against the stories of other Cubans who have difficulty in adapting. He seems to identify neither with Germans nor with Cubans. Roberto met a woman—an acquaintance of his German friend—and they started seeing each other on a regular basis. This woman, a left-wing activist, offered to marry Roberto so that he could stay in Germany. Roberto accepted and they lived together in a shared apartment. After their wedding, they started a love affair. It is not clear, whether she pressured him to have this relationship, as he would never admit to it. Nevertheless, they soon seemed to develop a kind of closeness, which Roberto could not stand, and he soon separated himself from her. Again it was impossible for Roberto to maintain a close relationship. Roberto legitimizes "the love affair" with his wife as well as the subsequent separation as the result of his Cuban character traits such as his "hot temperament." As Roberto himself stated, he is a

10 According to the German Office of Statistics (STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, 2007a, p.88), 8,798 Cuban immigrants now live in Germany, and 1,105 of these reside in Berlin (STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, 2007b, p.1). Some Cubans came to the former German Democratic Republic as labor migrants in the 1970s and 1980s, and they stayed in Germany after the demise of the Soviet Union. Others Cubans immigrated later in the 1990s.

11 Original quotation in Spanish: "empezé a ganar bien a tocar con, con todo tipo de de músicos los mismos africanos que brasileños que latinoamericanos, y, y fui a la escuela de alemán a empezar a aprender el idioma entonces decidí quedarme en Berlín y no y noirme 'a España' me gustó Berlín, me gustó Berlín por la tolerancia y por la libertad."

12 Original quotation in Spanish: "la vida como cubano en Berlín es 'difícil', es difícil sobre todo cuando:, cuando te opones a todo lo que no te gusta, lo que- lo que no te gusta aquí en Alemania, hay muchas cosas diferentes (2) neh, que uno, debe aprender y aceptar, en Alemania sino no, no te puedes integrar a la sociedad (2) conozco muchos cubanos que odian (3) a pesar de que viven aquí en Alemania hace muchos años (2) odian a los alemanes (2) no hablan el alemán (2) viven del Arbeitsamt y toman ron y juegan domino todos los días, y no tienen ningún futuro."

Cuban who is "too hot to resist" and too promiscuous to stay with her. When his wife became pregnant, Roberto did not want the baby, but she insisted. His son Felipe was born in 1996.

"What mostly inspires me, what inspires love is Fe—my son, Felipe (2) when Felipe was born (...) I was always with my baby, happy, really happy () I went for a walk, and didn't want to go out to other places, to go dancing, not me, me with my son, that was all, he filled my heart."¹³ [15]

This excerpt illustrates the impact the birth of his son had on Roberto. For the first time in the presentation of his life story, Roberto uses the word "love" or "loving someone,"¹⁴ and for the first time in his life, Roberto felt he truly belonged to someone or, more precisely, sees his son as belonging to him. Felipe appears to have put a stop to the restlessness in his life. Today, Roberto maintains close contact to his son and remains in Berlin to be near him. It seems as though he focuses much of his attention on Felipe while trying to make him an imitation of himself by, for example, sending him to an international school, insisting he learn Spanish, expecting him to be able to deal with every situation, and by trying to make a musician out of him. During the nine years Roberto has lived in Germany, he has always earned enough money as a musician. Every year he visits his family in Cuba together with his son. It seems that now he has a family of his own and due to the spatial distance, it is possible for Roberto to confront his original family. After their separation, the relationship to his family changed. Roberto now enjoys more attention from his family as a result of his increased social status. In this context, migration represents an upgraded socioeconomic position. Whenever Roberto now visits his family in Cuba, he apparently receives the attention he always desired from his family.

"Well, that is incredible, when, well, the whole, the whole family gets active, everyone is waiting for me to arrive, they prepare, they renovate all the houses, we also have a house at the beach, all, everyone is focused on my arrival, in Cuba as I said before, the time stands still in Cuba, everything is, always the same nothing happens, and when I go to Cuba; I think that this is the most important thing of the year () my family, when I go, I stay for six weeks, and my family is completely focused on me, organizing something, inviting me to dinner () in the house of my aunt, visits to relatives ah (2) but it is nice and it is know—it is good, it is great to know that one has so many people, who who like you."¹⁵ [16]

13 Original quotation in Spanish: "lo que más me, lo que más amor me inspira es Fe- mi niño, Felipe (2) cuando Felipe nació (...) estaba siempre con mi bebé, contento, supercontento () Salí de paseo y ya no quería salir a otra parte a bailar yo no, yo con mi niño, era todo, me llenaba el corazón."

14 It is only at the end of his autonomous self presentation—after having talked about his family story, his childhood, his career and his migration to Germany—that Roberto mentions his son.

15 Original quotation in Spanish: "aach, das ist, es increíble, cuando, bueno, toda la, toda la familia se moviliza, todos están esperando mi llegada, preparan todo, las casas las renovan, tenemos una casa en la playa también, todo o, todo el mundo está en función de mi llegada, en Cuba cómo dije anteriormente el- el tiempo se paró en Cuba, todo es, siempre lo mismo no pasa nada, y cuando yo voy a Cuba, pienso que es lo más importante en el año () 'mi familia, cuando voy' son seis semanas que yo estoy allá, y mi familia está, completamente en función de mí, organizando algo, invitándome a cenar, () en casa de mi tía, visita de familiares eh (2)

Nevertheless, it is quite unlikely that Roberto has ever spoken with his parents about their relationship and their difficult past, but separation and migration might represent a precondition for reconciliation. [17]

3. Results in Terms of Ethnicity

3.1 Sense of belonging

"It takes at least two somethings (sic!) to create a difference (and a belonging) ... Clearly each alone is—for the mind and perception—a non entity, a non being. Not different from being. Not different from non-being."
(Gregory BATESON 1979, p.78, in ERIKSEN, 2002, p.1)

The case reconstruction illustrates how the deeply rooted and reinforced feeling of rejection by his family led to Roberto's difficulty in developing a sense of belonging—a belonging to the nuclear family as well as to a collective we-group (such as a nation or an ethnic grouping)—since birth and during childhood and youth in Cuba. During the interview, Roberto presented himself as if he did not belong anywhere, but at the same time he believes he has the ability to adapt to any given surroundings. Social belonging to the nuclear family becomes a dominant theme, whereas belonging to an ethnic or national group or imagined community appears to be of lesser importance. Only with the birth of his son does Roberto seem to have found someone to whom he belongs. It is only now that he is able to retake or newly develop social ties with his parents, and his relatively negative and hostile view of his homeland has transformed into a "warm" presentation. [18]

3.2 Appropriation of ethnic categorizations and ascriptions

Although Roberto distances himself from other Cubans and Germans as mentioned above, he paradoxically seems to emphasize his "Cubanidad" when explaining and legitimating his personal traits or faults which could correspond to the ascribed and expected behavior of a Cuban or "Latino" in Germany.¹⁶ Roberto is not a passive victim of categorization. Instead, he takes external categorizations and ascriptions, with which he is confronted in the host society and uses them to cope with his problems or unexpected behavior over the course of his life. For instance, he legitimizes his inability to maintain relationships and take responsibilities with the argument that this behavior was a "typical Cuban character trait": "and I also had many, many good friends, who, when I left for Havana, I had to leave behind an—as, as the Cuban isn't used to maintain relationships ..." The reference to the "Cuban collective" appears to serve him for deviating from his own biography. In his discourse, Roberto presents himself as genetically determined by his ethnicity. By presenting himself as limited in his agency, he does not to a certain extend take responsibility for his actions. He does believe he is responsible for starting the love affair with his wife and for the

pero es, es lindo y es saber- es bueno, es rico que uno tiene tanta gente, que, que que te quiere."

16 Existing stereotypes about Cubans in Germany require further investigation.

subsequent separation. Instead, according to Roberto promiscuity is an inherited Cuban character trait. This underlying static conception of ethnicity in Roberto's self presentation depicts him as a "victim of his instincts" or "cultural inheritance." It appears as if the (seemingly strategic) appropriation and use of external classifications works well in his host society. The origin of this appropriation requires further investigation. [19]

3.3 Separation across national and geographical borders as a reunion

At first glance it might seem contradictory that the reunion of a family is first made possible by separation across national borders, but in the analysis of Roberto's biographical interview we were able to trace the genesis of this ambiguous relationship. [20]

As GLICK SCHILLER, BASCH and BLANC-SZANTON (1992, 1994, 1995) have claimed, migrants are not "uprooted," but instead maintain multi-stranded relations and are involved in both the sending and the receiving society. This is also true in Roberto's case, although his transnational relations have a genuine form. *Only* after his migration and socioeconomic ascent was Roberto able to receive the attention from his family he always desired. When Roberto visited Cuba, he suddenly became a prominent and important family member and he found himself in the center of attention. His improved social position in Cuba increased his slightly positive and idealistic connection to the home country as well as to his family of origin. Cuba here represents a *place of identification*, as APPADURAI (1998, p.20) has described the phenomenon, which cannot be seen as a copy of the real location but instead represents an imagined construction from the distance. Roberto's descriptions and stories concerning Cuba, which he relates from the present perspective, seem like a reinvention: "In Cuba as I said before, the time stands still in Cuba, everything is, always the same nothing happens." This perhaps explains, why Roberto could never really imagine returning to Cuba, as he is afraid of falling into the same old situation. A relationship with his family seems only to be possible for Roberto, if it is a relationship that is both transnational and a partly "imagined." [21]

4. Comparison with other Cuban Migrants in Germany

In Roberto's life there are many parallels to the lives of other Cuban immigrants we interviewed over the course of our research. Many interviewees left Cuba in the peak of the Special Period and migrated to Germany. One might part from the assumption of a relatively homogeneous group with similar ways of dealing with migration and ethnicity, but the detailed analysis of the case reconstructions shows, how a) the sense of belonging and the ethnic identity, b) the strategies for dealing with ethnic categorizations, and c) the form and intensity of transnational relations vary significantly from interviewee to interviewee. Strategies for dealing with ethnic categorizations and ascriptions vary from total rejection and a self presentation that contradicts such ascriptions (for example, Elena—one of our interviewees—presents herself as integrated into German society and distances herself from other Cubans, who do not work or only party) to the cultivation and

appropriation of external ascriptions by José—another interviewee—and Roberto. It is quite interesting that, with the exception of Elena, all interviewees maintain transnational relations despite Cuba's isolation. Yet family relationships gradually transform within the context of migration. By providing their relatives in Cuba with financial support, the interviewees obtain a higher status within their families. The results of the analysis of the interviews also show, how the migrants' financial support creates new social disparities and restructurings in Cuba. In consequence, the country is divided in those, who receive dollar remittances from abroad, and those, who do not have access to such resources. [22]

Concerning the sense of belonging and ethnic identity, Roberto's biography represents a specific case, as the deeply rooted feeling of rejection made it impossible for him to develop a belonging to a social or ethnic group. This proves the importance of in-depth analysis in empirical research into the subject of ethnic identity. [23]

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17 Extract of a table offered by the German Office of Statistics on request of ROSSBACH DE OLMOS for a research project.